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## POPULAR FALLACIES RESPECTING THE INDIANS

By HENRY W. HENSHAW

Since the day when Columbus miscalled the aborigines of America "Indians," believing that he had discovered India, popular fallacies respecting them have been numerous and widespread. Some of the more important of them will be discussed here.

*Origin of the Indians.* — As soon as, or even before, the newly-discovered continent was found to be not connected with Asia, theories of the origin of the Indians began to be formulated by the learned, and, consistently with the religious spirit of the age, a solution of the problem was sought in Hebrew tradition. In the Indians were recognized the descendants of the "lost tribes of Israel." The latest and most earnest supporters of the Hebrew origin are the Mormons, whose statements are alleged to have the authority of direct revelation. Absurd as the theory is in the light of present knowledge, anthropology owes to it several valuable treatises on the habits and characteristics of the Indians, which it could ill afford to lose, notably Lord Kingsborough's *Mexican Antiquities* and Adair's *History of the North American Indians*, the latter book being filled with fancied similarities to Jewish customs, rites, and even traditions.

Equally absurd, but less widespread, was the myth of a tribe of Welsh Indians, descendants of a colony reputed to have been founded by Prince Madoc about 1170. The myth located them, with their Welsh language and Welsh Bible, first on the Atlantic coast, where they were identified with the Tuscarora, and then farther and farther west, until about 1776 we find the Welsh, or "white," Indians on the Missouri, where they appeared as the Mandan (according to Catlin), later on Red river. Later still they were identified with the Hopi of Arizona, and finally with the Modoc of Oregon, after which they vanish.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Mooney in *Am. Anthropol.*, IV, 393, 1891.

Other seekers of a foreign origin for the American aborigines have derived them in turn from Greeks, Chinese, Japanese, Phœnicians, Irish, Polynesians, and even from the peoples of Australasia. Most of these theories are based on fortuitous analogies in habits, institutions, and arts ; but the attempt is frequently made to strengthen them by alleged similarities of language, language being confessedly the principal basis for classifying peoples. The general similarity of the human mind in similar stages of culture in every part of the world, with its proneness to produce similar arts, institutions, religious ideas, myths, and even material products, sufficiently explains the former class of facts, whilst the hypotheses of identity of language, based, as they invariably are, on a small number of verbal similarities in the nature of coincidences, are wholly disproved on adequate examination and analysis.

*Indian Languages.* — Indian languages are so utterly unlike European speech in sound and so different in structure and character that it is not surprising that erroneous conceptions concerning them should arise. The unlearned conceived the ideas that the speech of all Indians of whatsoever tribe was practically the same, that it was little more than a sort of gibberish, that it contained but a small number of words, that to eke out its shortcomings the Indian was compelled to use gestures, that it was hardly human speech, much less orderly and well developed language.

A comprehension of the manifold variety of Indian linguistic families, embracing a multitude of languages and dialects, of their rich vocabularies, flexible grammatical methods, and general sufficiency to express any and all concepts the Indian mind is capable of entertaining, above all, of their capacity, shared with more advanced tongues, of indefinite expansion corresponding to culture growth, was reserved for a later period and more complete study. The intricacies of Indian languages are even yet but partially understood ; their proper study has hardly begun, so vast is the field.

*Indians not Nomadic.* — One of the common fallacies of early historians, by no means yet entirely dissipated, was the idea that the Indians were generally nomadic, having no fixed place of abode, but wandering hither and yon as fancy or the necessities of existence demanded. The term nomadic is not, in fact, properly ap-

plicable to any Indian tribe. Every tribe and every congeries of tribes, with exceptions to be noted, laid claim to and dwelt within the limits of a certain tract or region the boundaries of which were well understood and were handed down by tradition and never relinquished save to a superior force. Between many of the tribes, indeed, were debatable areas, owned by none but claimed by all, which from time immemorial formed the cause of disputes and inter-tribal wars. Most or all of the tribes east of Mississippi river, except in the north, and some west of it, were to a greater or less extent agricultural and depended much for food on the products of their tillage. During the hunting season such tribes or villages broke up into small parties and dispersed over their domains more or less widely in search of game; or they visited the seashore for fish and shellfish. Only in this restricted sense may they be said to be nomadic. The so-called "horse Indians" and the Plains Indians, at least after the latter acquired the horse, wandered very widely in search of their chief dependence, the buffalo. Though most of these had no fixed and permanent villages, they yet possessed clear ideas as to the extent of their own territory as well as that of their neighbors. The Athapascan and Algonquian tribes of the far north, where absence of agriculture, the wide expanses of desolate territory, and the nature of the game necessitated frequent changes of abode and forbade any form of fixed village life, most nearly approached nomadic life.

*Indian Ownership of Land.* — The exact nature of Indian ownership of land appears not to have been understood by the early settlers, and the misunderstanding was the fruitful source of trouble and even bloodshed. Neither the individual Indian nor the family possessed vested rights in land. The land belonged to the tribe as a whole. Individual families and clans might appropriate for their own use and tillage any portion of the tribe's unoccupied domain. Hence it was impossible for a chief, family, clan, or any section of a tribe legally to sell or to give away to aliens, white or red, any part of the tribal domain, and the inevitable consequences of illegal sales or gifts was bad feeling, followed often by repudiation of the contract by the tribe as a whole. Attempts by the whites to enforce these supposed legal sales were followed by disorder and bloodshed, often by prolonged wars.

*Ideas of Royalty.* — It is perhaps not strange that the early emigrants to America, habituated to European ideas of royal descent and kingly prerogative, should describe the simple village and tribal organizations of the Indians with high-sounding phrases. Early treatises on the Indians teem with the terms “king,” “queen,” and “princess,” and even with ideas of hereditary privilege and rank. It would be difficult to imagine states of society more unlike than one implied by such terms and the simple democracy of most of the Indians. On the northwest coast ideas of caste had gained a foothold, principally founded on a property basis, but this was exceptional. Equality and independence were the cardinal principles of Indian society. In some tribes, as the Iroquois, certain of the highest chieftaincies were confined to certain clans, and these may be said in a modified sense to have been hereditary. Practically, however, all the offices within the limits of the tribal government were purely elective. The ability of the candidates, their courage, eloquence, previous services, above all their personal popularity, formed the basis for election to any and all offices. No power in any wise analogous to that of the despot, no rank savoring of inheritance, as we understand the term, existed among our Indians. Even military service was not compulsory, but he who would might organize a war party, and the courage and known prowess in war of the leader chiefly determined the number of his followers. So loose were the ties of authority on the warpath that a bad dream or an unlucky presage was enough to diminish the number of the war party at any time or even to break it up entirely.

The idea prevalent among the colonists of a legal executive head over the Indians, a so-called king, was acceptable on account of the aid it lent to the transaction of business with the Indians, especially to the enforcement of contracts. It enabled the colonists to treat directly and effectively with one man, or at most with a few, for the sale of land, instead of with the tribe as a whole. The fact is that social and political organization was of the lowest kind; the very name of tribe, with implication of a body bound together by social ties and under some central authority, is of very uncertain application.

*Knowledge of Medicine.* — Many erroneous ideas of the practice of medicine among the Indians are current, often fostered by quacks

who claim to have received herbs and methods of practice from noted Indian doctors. The medical art among all Indians was rooted in sorcery; and the prevailing idea that diseases were caused by the presence or acts of evil spirits, which could be removed only by sorcery and incantation, controlled diagnosis and treatment. This conception gave rise to both priest and physician. Combined with it there grew up a certain knowledge of and dependence upon simples, one important development of which was what we know as the doctrine of signatures, according to which the color, shape, and markings of plants are supposed to indicate the organs for which in disease they are supposed to be efficacious specifics. There was current in many tribes, especially among the old women, a rude knowledge of the therapeutic use of a considerable number of plants and roots and of the sweating process, which was employed with little discrimination.

*The Great Spirit.* — Among the many erroneous conceptions regarding the Indian none has taken deeper root than the one which ascribes to him belief in an overruling deity, the "Great Spirit." Very far removed from this tremendous conception of one all-powerful deity was the Indian belief in a multitude of spirits that dwelt in animate and inanimate objects, to propitiate which was the chief object of his supplications and sacrifices. To none of his deities did the Indian ascribe moral good or evil. His religion was practical. The spirits were the source of good or bad fortune whether on the hunting path or the war trail, in the pursuit of a wife or in a ball game. If successful he adored, offered sacrifices, and made valuable presents. If unsuccessful he cast his manitou away and offered his faith to more powerful or more friendly deities.

In this world of spirits the Indian dwelt in perpetual fear. He feared to offend the spirits of the mountains, of the dark wood, of the lake, of the prairie. The real Indian was a different creature from the joyous and untrammelled savage pictured and envied by the poet and philosopher.

*Happy Hunting Ground.* — If the term be understood to imply nothing more than a belief of the Indian in a future existence, it answers, perhaps, as well as another. That the Indian believes in a future life his mortuary rites abundantly testify. It may be con-

fidently stated that no tribe of American Indians was without some idea of a life after death ; but as to its exact nature and whereabouts the Indian's ideas, differing in different tribes, were vague. Nor does it appear that belief in a future life had any marked influence on the daily life and conduct of the individual. The American Indian seems not to have evolved the idea of hell and future punishment.

*Division of Labor.* — The position of woman in Indian society, especially as regards the division of labor, has been misunderstood. Historians have generally pictured her as a drudge and slave, toiling incessantly, while her indolent husband idles away most of the time and exists chiefly by the fruits of her labor. While the picture is not wholly false, it is much overdrawn, chiefly because the observations which suggest it were made about the camp or village, in which and in the neighboring fields lay the peculiar province of woman's activity. In addition to the nurture of children, their duties were the care of the habitation, cooking, preparation of skins, and the making of clothing, pottery, and basketry ; and among many tribes they were expected also to help bring home the spoils of the chase. Among agricultural tribes tillage of the fields was largely woman's work. Thus her tasks were many and laborious, but she had her hours for gossip and for special women's games. In an Indian community, where the food question is always a serious one, there can be no idle hands. The women were aided in their round of tasks by the children and the old men. Where slavery existed their toil was further lightened by the aid of slaves, and in other tribes captives were often compelled to aid in the women's work.

The men did all the hunting, fishing, and trapping, which in savagery are always toilsome, frequently dangerous, and not rarely fatal, especially in winter. The man alone bore arms, and to him belonged the chances and dangers of war. The making and administration of laws, the conduct of treaties, and the general regulation of tribal affairs were in the hands of the men, though in these fields woman also had important prerogatives. To men were entrusted all the important ceremonies and most of the religious rites, also the task of memorizing tribal records and treaties, as well as rituals,

which involved astonishing feats of memory. The chief manual labor of the men was the manufacture of hunting and war implements, an important occupation that took much time. The manufacture of canoes, also, was chiefly man's work. Thus in Indian society the position of woman was always subordinate, and the lines of demarcation between the duties of the sexes were everywhere sharply drawn. Nevertheless, the division of labor was not so unequal as it might seem to the casual observer, and it is difficult to understand how the line could have been more fairly drawn in a state of society where the military spirit was so dominant. Indian communities lived in constant danger of attack, and their men, whether in camp or on the march, must ever be ready at a moment's warning to seize their arms and defend their homes and families.

Where Indian communities adopted settled village life, as did the Pueblo peoples, or where the nature of tribal wealth was such as to enable women to become property-holders on a large scale, as among the Navaho, whose women own the sheep, or where slavery was an established institution and extensively practised, as among the northwest coast tribes, the position of women advanced, and there ensued, among other social changes, a more equal division of laborious tasks.

*Indian Population.* — Early estimates of Indian population were greatly exaggerated, chiefly because they were based on the numbers observed in the more populous districts, as along the coast, on the natural waterways, and in permanent settlements. The inference was that elsewhere the population was equally large, whereas the country as a whole was but sparsely populated, and there were extensive tracts in the United States which were practically uninhabited. Later, when a fairly accurate census revealed a comparatively small population, the difference between the first estimates and the actual numbers was accounted for by the theory of rapid decimation due to pestilence. The Indian population of prehistoric America can never be known, but all available data indicate that it could not possibly have exceeded a million; many authorities believe an estimate of half that number sufficient.

*Degeneracy of Mixed-bloods.* — It has long been an adage that the mixed-blood is a moral degenerate, exhibiting few or none of



the virtues of either, but all the vices of both of the parent stocks. In various parts of the country there are many mixed-bloods of undoubted ability and of high moral standing, and there is no evidence to prove that the low moral status of the average mixed-bloods of the frontier is a necessary result of mixture of blood, but there is much to indicate that it arises chiefly from his unfortunate environment. The mixed-blood finds little favor with either race, while his superior education and advantages, derived from association with the whites, enable him to outstrip his Indian brother in the pursuit of either good or evil. Absorption into the dominant race is likely to be the fate of the Indian, and there is no reason to fear that when freed from his anomalous environment the mixed-blood will not win an honorable, social, industrial, and political place in the national life.

*Indian Pygmies and Giants.* — All times and all peoples have had traditions of pygmies and giants. It is therefore nowise surprising that such myths were early transplanted to American soil. The story of an ancient race of pygmies in Tennessee, familiar to most archeologists, owes its origin to the discovery, in the early half of the last century, of numerous small stone coffins, or cists, containing skeletons. The largest, measured by Featherstonhaugh, was 24 inches long by 9 inches deep. The small size of the cists was assumed by their discoverers to be proof of the existence of a race of dwarfs, and the belief gained ready credence and exists to the present day in the minds of a few. In many cases the skeletons of the supposed dwarfs proved to be those of children, while, as pointed out by Jones and Thomas, the skeletons of the adults found in the cists had been deprived of flesh, a common Indian mortuary custom, and then disjoined, when the bones of an adult could be packed into a very small space.

A race of dwarfs has also been popularly ascribed to the cliff-dweller region of New Mexico and Arizona, partly owing to the finding of shriveled and shrunken mummies of children, too hastily assumed to be those of dwarfs, and partly owing to the discovery of small apartments in the cliff dwellings, of the nature of cubby-holes for the storage of property, the entrances to which were too small to permit the passage, erect, of an ordinary man ; hence, in the

mind of the discoverers, they must have been used by dwarfs. The Pueblo peoples are, indeed, of relatively small stature, but they are as far from being dwarfs as other Indians from being giants.<sup>1</sup>

The myth of the discovery of giant skeletons perennial in newspapers, is revived at times by the finding of huge fossil mammalian remains of ancient epochs, erroneously supposed by the ignorant to be human; at others by the discovery of buried skeletons the bones of which have in the course of time become separated so as to give the impression of beings of unusual height. There was considerable diversity of stature among Indian tribes, some, as the Pueblos, being of rather small size, while among the tribes of the lower Colorado and the Plains were many men of unusual size. Now and then, too, as among other peoples, a man is found who is a real giant among his kind; a skeleton was exhumed in West Virginia which measured 7 ½ feet in length and 19 inches across the shoulders.

*Mound-builders and Cliff-dwellers.*—The belief was formerly held by many that the mound-builders of the Mississippi valley and the cliff-dwellers of the southwestern border were racially distinct from the Indians or had reached a superior degree of culture. The more thoroughly the mounds and cliff ruins have been explored and the more carefully the artifacts, customs, and culture status of these ancient peoples are studied, the more apparent is it that their attainments were nowise superior to those of the later Indian. There is no evidence incompatible with the theory that the builders of the mounds and the dwellers in the cliffs are the ancestors of the tribes now or recently in possession of the same regions.

*Stolidity and Taciturnity.*—The idea of the Indian, once popular, suggests a taciturn and stolid character who smoked his pipe in silence and stalked reserved and dignified among his fellows. Unquestionably the Indian of the Atlantic slope differed in many respects from his kinsmen farther west; it may be that the forest Indian of the north and east imbibed something of the spirit of the primeval woods which, deep and gloomy, overspread much of his region. If so, he has no counterpart in the regions west of the

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For details respecting the dwarfs of Tennessee see Haywood, *Natural and Aboriginal History of Tennessee*, 1823; and Jones, *Antiquities of Tennessee*, 10, 1876.

Mississippi. On occasions of ceremony and religion the western Indian can be both dignified and solemn, as befits the occasion, but his nature, if not as bright and sunny as that of the Polynesian, is at least as far removed from moroseness as his disposition is from taciturnity. The Indian of the present day has a fair sense of humor and is by no means a stranger to jest, laughter, and even repartee.